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AUTHOR Harter, Jean R.
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ABSTRACT

The number of minority children who are placed in special education programs is disproportionate to the number of minority children in school. One factor causing this situation is that dialect interference causes lower reading scores among minority children. Since few standardized tests instruct the teacher to ignore errors attributable to differences between the child's dialect and standard English, children who speak in dialect regularly get lower scores than would be the case if such errors were ignored. In discounting the effect of dialect interference, teachers should pay particular attention to the areas of word recognition (errors attributable to a nonstandard dialect should be ignored), latency (a child may recognize words slowly because a translation process is occurring), and comprehension (what really matters is whether or not the child understands the text). Some typical black dialect variations from standard English are omissions ("hep" for "help"), substitutions ("pin" for "pen"), syntax (omission of prepositions), and word order changes ("why she won't come?" for "why won't she come?"). (TJ)

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Linguistically unbiased reading assessments: Let's make it a reality*

Jean R. Harber
Assistant Professor
Department of Special Education
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742

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Linguistically unbiased reading assessments: Let's make it a reality

Recent research has shown that a disproportionate number of culturally different children have been classified as and placed in special education programs. Dunn (1968) reported that a disproportionately large number of children in classes for the educable mentally retarded are Black and Spanish-speaking. Riles (1969) found that the rate of placement of Spanish surname children in special education classes for the retarded was about three times higher than for whites, and the rate of placement for Blacks was close to four times higher than for whites in California. Mercer's (1972) findings were similar; she found that there were two and one-half times more Blacks in special classes for the mentally retarded in Riverside, California than would be expected by their distribution in the population. Franks (1971) and Burke (1975) found that educable mentally retarded classes contained disproportionate numbers of Black children and learning disabilities programs were predominantly composed of white middle - and upper - class children. Furthermore, it has been found that once placed in a class for the educable mentally retarded, it is less likely that the Black child will leave the class than the white child (Chenault, 1971). These facts clearly indicate that there have been a disproportionate number of culturally different children labeled educable mentally retarded and placed in programs for the educable mentally retarded. It has been suggested that the evaluation and classification procedures utilized may be, in part, responsible for the disproportionately high percentage of culturally different children in such programs.

Numerous researchers have questioned whether many of our commonly used tests and testing procedures are appropriate for use with culturally different

children. The finding that numerous tests are culturally and/or linguistically biased has caused researchers and educators (Alder, 1973; Hutchinson, 1972; Roberts, Note 4) to question whether these tests should be used for children who do not speak primarily standard English. Bartel, Grill, and Bryen (1973) stated that the use of many of the available tests with dialect speaking children may result in gross errors in the educational placement of these children. Labov (1972) cites examples of how ignorance on the part of examiners can lead to depressed test performance of Black English-speaking children (e.g., open-ended questioning).

A review of the literature indicates that if dialect interference (the result of the difference between the dialect of the child and the dialect taught in the schools which is believed by some to interfere with the child's ability to learn to read the standard English taught in the schools) is a significant factor in the poor reading achievement of many Black urban children, it is probably most obvious during listening comprehension, oral reading, and oral reading comprehension tasks (Harber, Note 2). Since judgments of children's reading ability are very frequently based primarily or even solely on their oral reading performance (Spache, 1976) and judgments of children's reading potential are very often based on their listening comprehension performance (Spache, 1972, 1976), dialect interference may be, in part, responsible for the reported poor reading performance of many Black urban children. Recent studies of the dialects of minority groups have shown that the differences between the child's dialect and standard English affect the child's oral reading and thus influence the examiner's estimates of the child's reading ability. Yet only a few tests (e.g., Spache Diagnostic Reading Scales and Smith and Bradmueller's Inventory) tell the examiner to discount or ignore oral errors due to dialect.

Recent research has also indicated that allowing for dialect renderings of standard English reading materials significantly enhances the scores of Black English-speaking children (Hunt, 1975; Hutchinson, 1972; Harber, Note 1). Hunt (1975) investigated ways in which speaking nonstandard English might affect a child's performance on an oral reading test. She administered the Gray Oral Reading Test to third and fourth grade Black inner-city subjects and scored their performance first according to the test directions and then so that errors attributable to the use of nonstandard English were not counted as errors. Her results indicated that subjects received significantly higher scores when errors which were attributable to the use of nonstandard English were not counted as errors than when the test protocols were scored according to the test directions.

In a similar study Harber (Note 1) investigated the performance of third and fourth grade nonstandard English speaking and standard English-speaking students on the Gray Oral Reading Test. The test protocols were scored as follows. Score I was a measure of word recognition in which all changes from the stimulus materials were counted as errors. In Score II, also a measure of word recognition, errors attributable to the use of nonstandard English were not counted as errors. Score III was a measure of latency time (time it took the subject to read the passage). Results indicated that the nonstandard English-speaking subjects scored significantly higher on Score II than on Score I. An examination of the dialect errors made by the nonstandard English-speaking subjects indicated that 45% of the errors on Score I were errors attributable to the use of nonstandard English. Furthermore, the vast majority of these "errors" were phonological in nature. That 45% of the errors were attributable to the use of nonstandard English demonstrates the vast

influence nonstandard speech has on children's obtained test scores. The fact that the vast majority of these errors were phonological is highly significant in light of the fact that researchers have found that phonemic variations are less likely to interfere with comprehension than are syntactic variations (Melmed, 1971; Mitchell - Kernan, Note 3). The nonstandard English-speaking subjects scored significantly lower than the standard English-speaking subjects on Score III. While this finding is not surprising since the nonstandard English-speaking subjects had an additional task to perform -- translating what they saw in print into their familiar dialect -- , it is highly significant in terms of our current assessment procedures. Many reading tests include a measure of latency in their scoring procedure. Since the nonstandard English-speaking child is faced with the additional task of translating what he or she sees in print into his or her familiar dialect, additional time may be needed to accomplish the reading task. In addition, as Hunt (1975) noted, varying rhythms or speeds of speech may be characteristic of different dialects.

Hutchinson (1972) analyzed the errors made by 75 Black, inner-city, second graders on the Word Discrimination subtest of the Metropolitan Reading Test. She found three types of errors attributable to nonstandard English: items which are differentiated in standard English but homophonous in nonstandard English (e.g., item # 28, sold and sole), items which are distinguished by fewer sounds in nonstandard English than in standard English (e.g., item # 10, stairs and stays), and items which are culturally inappropriate (e.g., item # 33, custom). She then eliminated these items, which constituted approximately one-third of the items on the subtest, and found that her subjects obtained significantly higher scores on the modified test.

The findings reviewed above should not be generalized to other reading

tests without empirical studies to support or refute the role the dialect of a child's response plays in the child's obtained score. While continued research is needed to further investigate the allegation of linguistic and cultural bias in standardized reading tests, the findings of the studies reviewed above strongly indicate the need to modify scoring procedures to incorporate group differences and not to attach negative values to these differences.

Particular attention should be paid to the following areas:

(1) Word recognition - Can the child's oral responses to the printed material be attributable to the use of a nonstandard dialect of English? If so, these changes should not be counted as errors.

(2) Latency (time it take the subject to read the passage) - Is the child's score depressed due, at least in part, to the extra time he/she took in translating what he /she saw in print into his/her familiar dialect? Perhaps we should not use measures which do not score latency time separately from word recognition.

(3) Comprehension - Most importantly, can the child understand the printed text? This is, in essence, the reason for learning to read.

Among the Black English variations from standard English that are likely to manifest themselves in oral reading are:

Omissions: of r or l as in god-guard, hep-help
of final consonants and consonant clusters as in pass-past, row-road, and others involving t, d, s, z, g, and k.

Substitutions: i for e as in pin-pen, pinny-penny.
voiced final th becomes v as in breav-breathe
unvoiced final th becomes f as in bref-breath
initial th becomes d as de-the
of certain clusters, e.g., skream-stream

Additions: certain plurals ending in st becomes stes as in testes-test

Syntax: omission of final s in third person singular as in wonder-wonders
omission of s in possessives
omission of prepositions as in He goes the school. - He goes to the school.
omission of ed signifying past tense
omission of s in plurals
use of double negative
substitution for the copula as in He be my dog - He is my dog

Word order changes: transposition of the auxiliary verb as in Why she won't come? - Why won't she come?
if construction as in I asked him did he do it - I asked him if he did it.

Certainly an analysis of a child's oral reading that considers dialect variations as oral reading errors can hardly yield an accurate estimate of the child's reading ability if we define reading as the ability to comprehend the printed word. As long as current assessment procedures are continued, the schools are, in essence, asking nonstandard English-speaking children to meet a standard which standard English-speaking children are not asked to meet -- the standard of being evaluated in a dialect they do not speak.

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